

Creative Computing®

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Apple IIe, Epson HX-20

March 1983
vol 9, no 3
\$2.95

In-depth Evaluations:

- 14 Printers
- Microfazer
- Word Processors for Color Computer
- Color Computer Disk Drive
- Data Factory
- Color Computer Games
- TRS-80 Games
- Paint

Dark Crystal:
A Look Behind
The Scenes

Michael Crichton:
Predicting
The Future

**Home
Library
Catalog
Program**

**TRS-80
Graphics**

Columns:

- Graphics
- TRS-80
- Apple
- Atari
- Logo
- IBM
- Book Reviews



issue...in this issue...in this

evaluations & profiles

Printers and Word Processing

- 12 Buying A Printer**Ahl
How to decide which one is for you
- 30 Printer Evaluations**Anderson and Linzmayer
We evaluate and rate 14 printers
- 64 Microfazer From Quadram**Ahl
Data buffer saves time
- 72 Printer Update**Linzmayr
Newest printers on the market
- 81 Word Processing With Apple, Diablo And WordStar**Mar
Some do's and some don'ts
- 89 Three Word Processors For TRS-80 Color Computer**Norman
Telewriter, C.C. Writer and Color Scripts

- 101 Epson HX-20**Ahl
Good things come in small packages
- 116 Apple IIe**Goodman
A firsthand examination
- 132 Color Computer Disk Drive**Steiner
Getting serious with the Color Computer
- 136 Data Factory**O'Rourke
Foolproof, flexible database management
- 144 Electronic Canvas**Anderson
Paint, a graphics composer for the Atari
- 152 TRS-80 Arcade Games**Linzmayr
Six of the best we've seen
- 160 Color Computer Games**Linzmayr
Bugs, spaceships and raquetball for the Color Computer

Cover illustration by Pat Ruggero.

March, 1983
Volume 9, Number 3



Creative Computing (ISSN 0 097-8140) is published monthly by Ahl Computing, Inc., a subsidiary of Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. David Ahl, President; Elizabeth B. Staples, Vice President; Selwyn Taubman, Treasurer; Bertram A. Abrams, Secretary. P.O. Box 789-M Morristown, N.J. 07960. Second Class postage paid at New York, NY 10001 and at additional mailing offices.
Copyright ©1983 by Ahl Computing, Inc. All rights reserved.
Editorial offices located at 39 East Hanover Ave., Morris Plains, NJ 07950. Phone (201) 540-0445.
Domestic Subscriptions: 12 issues \$24.97; 24 issues \$43.97; 36 issues \$57.97.
POSTMASTER: send address changes to Creative Computing, P.O. Box 5214, Boulder, CO 80321. Call 800-631-8112 toll-free (in New Jersey call 201-540-0445) to order a subscription.

articles

- 168 The Dark Crystal**Anderson
A look behind the scenes
- 178 How To Solve It**Piele
Beyond turtle graphics
- 187 Logo Ideas**Lawler
Variables and Abstraction

applications & software

- 188 Predicting The Future**Crichton
A program to cast the I Ching
- 204 TRS-80 Graphics Made Almost Painless**Crew
Part two: vector plotter
- 214 Computer Art For The Tektronix**Jacobson
Sinusoidal loop no. 2
- 216 Library Catalog**Hellman
Create a computer based home library catalog

departments

- 6 Input/Output**Readers
- 8 Notices**Fee
- 10 Seven Years Ago**Ahl
- 258 Graph Paper**Lubar
Part nine: the wrap-up
- 265 New Products**Staff
- 272 Apple Cart**Adams
A speech synthesis program
- 276 Outpost: Atari**Anderson
Light pens to buy and make
- 284 IBM Images**Fastie
Most frequently asked questions answered
- 294 TRS-80 Strings**Gray
Spectrums, spirals and Tandyvision
- 300 Book Reviews**Gray

The Movie . . .



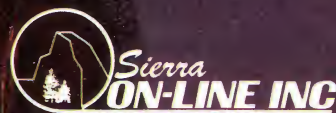
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THE DARK CRYSTAL

John Anderson

Jen and the Crystal

Dark Crystal is an amazing amalgam. Though it is an original, it doubtless shares elements of Lucas' *Star Wars*, Williams' *Masquerade*, and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. It is fantasy adventure and mythic fable; it is the story both of a world and of a boy. It is a film, a microcomputer program, a record, at least three books, toys, even fashions. Oh yes, and it is the latest gift from the main Muppet at Muppet control, Jim Henson.

Who is better qualified, when you come right down to it, to bring a full-fledged fantasy adventure to a mass audience than Jim Henson, Frank Oz, and the other inspired folks who have been packaging fantasy for years now? That they are puppeteers is certainly true, but it is less than the whole truth. They are illusionists, purveyors of pretending, and they focus all their energies on bringing rich imaginary worlds to utter, teeming, show-stopping life.

Henson claims that the project has been in some stage of development for the past five years, but I know better. I can clearly trace its inception to an extremely motley gaggle of monsters, more seedy than scary, an unnamed troupe I can only describe as the "Not Ready for Prime-Time Muppets." They occasionally inhabited the old *Saturday Night Live* program in its heyday (when it was funny), back in 1975 or so. In the few moments per episode they appeared, they invariably stole the show.

The leader of the group was Scred, a snaggle-toothed, baggy-eyed reptile of indiscriminate origins, who looked for all the world like he had smoked too many insects before going on. His world was one of fractured myth, where stone idols shrugged in embarrassed indifference, while helmeted sidekicks evoked peculiar Norse legends. Beside his charismatic anti-hero personality, the most magnetic thing about Scred was his gaze: his eyeballs were positively *real*. And this was a germ of things to come, a breakthrough of sorts. Scred's eyes were not of felt or plastic, but rather of glass; they had come from a taxidermist.

The legacy of Scred lives on in the icky Skeksis of the *Dark Crystal*, from the reptilian gaze to the "sk" sound in their names. And for all his seventies cynicism, Scred should be very proud to have figured into the ancestry of such a project.

In 1977, Henson took another step toward realizing his ambitious goal. He became aware of the work of fantasy artist

Brian Froud, and was immediately convinced that Froud was the only person who could bring to fruition the characters and world growing in Henson's mind. Froud saw that Henson was the one person who could imbue Froud's creations with *life*. And so a fortuitous partnership was met—one that I hope will not be disbanded for some time to come.

Another milestone for the project can be accurately marked in 1979, when Frank Oz brought the character of Yoda to *The Empire Strikes Back*. This partnership brought Henson Associates into contact with Gary Kurtz, producer of the *Star Wars* films, and now of *Dark Crystal*. In the following year, when Yoda proved to be not only the major star of *Empire* but the most bankable star in Hollywood, it became apparent that audiences were ready for the kind of fantasy Henson wanted to provide. An-

into the Muppet scheme of things, and has successfully made the transition from opulent mansion to vital, inviting workplace. There I met with the Henson folks, along with Chris Cerf and Roberta and Ken Williams, to talk about the microcomputer version of *Dark Crystal*.

Hobby microcomputerists are by and large no strangers to adventure fantasy; for some, it is the prevalent type of program run on their machines. I wrote about technical advances in the graphic adventure in the August 1982 issue of *Creative Computing*. While the microcomputer adventure is still not quite as popular as other fictional forms, I assert that it is only a matter of time until it emerges alongside the novel, short story, and film as a storytelling medium. You heard it here first, folks.

Further, it will flourish due to its unique, involving, interactive nature. You do not merely observe the action,



Jen and a Mystic.

other upstartish director also took note of this: Steven Spielberg. He made *E.T.* into the Yoda of '82—in fact, he even acknowledges his debt in the film.

Henson's philosophic underpinning is not mysterious. He states it in rather straightforward terms through his alterego, Kermit, at the climax of *The Muppet Movie*. Though I cannot remember the exact lyrics of the finale, the gist is along the following lines: "Hey," Kermit says, "you've been watching a bunch of felt, wire, and trickery for the past two hours, and were swept into what you saw. This is important, because it proves that you can still pretend, and that is something we should always be able to do. That is what keeps us young."

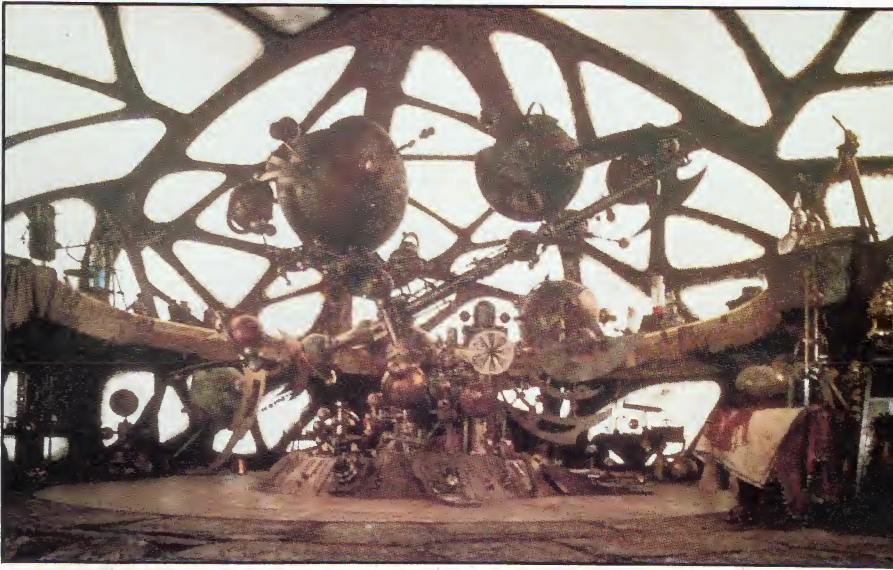
Nestled, one might even say *camouflaged*, unobtrusively in a fashionable cluster of townhouses on New York's Upper East Side, is the home of Henson Associates. The location fits perfectly

you are a part of it. Your decisions affect the outcome. Your actions count.

Ken and Roberta Williams, the driving force behind Sierra On-Line, are no strangers to the adventure form either. They developed some of its most popular titles, including *Wizard and the Princess*, and the epic *Time Zone*, which has already achieved classic status. Nor is Chris Cerf a novice. He is the writer, publisher, and microcomputer aficionado who has worked with Roberta to develop the graphic adventure *Dark Crystal*.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that computer games using the names and some imagery from popular films are a new thing. But all of the stuff we've seen so far has come out long after the fact, and has built an arcade-style "twitch" game out of a few concepts from a film. *Dark Crystal* is the first work to be released simultaneously as film and computer program; and is the

The author wishes to extend his gratitude to Mary Ann Horstmeier and Maureen Ruddy of Henson Associates for their gracious help.



Aughra's Observatory.



Historian Skeksis.



Jen and the Skeksis Chamberlain.

first computer adventure to be based on a feature film.

The Plot Thickens

The *Dark Crystal* is sure to gain cult status in short order. It is the story of a world with three suns, a world once inhabited by three races: the urSkeks, the Gelfings, and the Pod people. They coexisted peacefully and productively, governed by a huge, glowing crystal, which ensured their well-being.

Every thousand years the three suns would come together, and a kind of re-birth would take place in the light of a Great Conjunction. But something happened a thousand years ago, at the time of the last conjunction. The urSkeks schizophrenically split into two separate and opposite beings: the urRu—wise, if passive philosophers—and the Skeksis—



Aughra, Keeper of Secrets.

evil, monstrous tyrants. The Skeksis seized control of the Crystal, and with it, control of the planet. A piece of the crystal itself broke off, and the remaining part darkened. Gelfling prophecy held that the missing shard could be replaced only during the next conjunction, and only by a Gelfling, if the Skeksis were to be destroyed. They would otherwise rule forever.

The Skeksis took what they saw to be positive action to defuse the prophecy—they undertook to kill every Gelfling on the planet. And they very nearly succeeded. With the exception of Jen, raised by the urRu, and Kira, raised by the Pod People, every Gelfling on the planet was murdered. As the banquet scene will verify, the Skeksis simply aren't the kind of folks you invite for dinner.

Jen, of course, is the great Gelfling hope, and with Kira's help, attempts to realize the ancient prophecy. They en-



©Henson Org./Knopf 1982

The Dark Crystal by Brian Froud.

counter many strange beings, as well as puzzles, dangers, and mysteries en route.

One of these is Aughra, the sorceress, played by Frank Oz. Oz has emerged as perhaps an even more phenomenal puppeteer than Henson himself. His characterizations of Miss Piggy and Fozzy Bear have brought the name Oz a new meaning worldwide. When Yoda's nose twitched reflexively, when his brow crinkled in thought, Frank Oz was plying his trade.

Henson and Froud have worked to present a world as rich in complexity and detail as possible. Some shots of only seconds in length took days to pro-



©Henson Org./Knopf 1982

An urRu by Brian Froud.

duce. This is what makes the world of the *Dark Crystal* truly a world. The same kind of magic that brought you Kermit



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SkekUng the Garthim-Master by Froud.



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Gelfling Heiroglyphs by Brian Froud.

on a bicycle and Fozzy at the wheel, here brings you good versus evil on a grand scale.

The microcomputer adventure version of the *Dark Crystal* takes place in exactly this same world, though some very new challenges are offered. You are Jen, and your goal is restoration of the crystal. Knowledge of the film will help you along the way, but the action has new depths and new levels of complexity. Certainly the richness of detail that the film affords will heighten the sense of magic you experience while playing the computer version.

Creating graphic adventures has be-



©Henson Org./Knopf 1982

Kira on a Landstrider by Froud.



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SkekZok the Ritual-Master by Froud.



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SkekEkt the Ornamentalist by Froud.



Ken and Roberta Williams.

come nearly second nature for Roberta Williams. The *Dark Crystal* project took her a little over a month. "It was easier because the map was mostly already there," she says, "though we've added some surprises." Asking her what comes first in game development is like asking about chickens and eggs. "It evolves as I'm building it. New possibilities always

pop up. The toughest thing sometimes is deciding what to put in and what to leave out, because so much could be there."

Roberta works all her plans out on paper—sometimes huge sheets of wrapping paper—with all sorts of notes heading off in all sorts of directions. No other human being can make much out of

what is there—not without training, anyway. When I asked her why she didn't use a word processor or database package to help with game development, she chuckled. "I guess computers still intimidate me a little bit. I'd just rather work it out on paper."

Ken spoke of how a tiny family business has grown in three short years. "There was a time when the idea of hiring programmers just for translation would have been unthinkable. Right now we're putting a big emphasis on



Preliminary screen art for the micro-computer adventure.

program translation," he says. "We intend *Dark Crystal* to be available for the Apple, Atari, IBM, and Commodore 64 machines. We are also translating many of our other popular games. The demand is there."

Dark Crystal is destined to introduce thousands of computer users to the realm of the computer adventure. I cannot think of any collaboration that could have done nearly as well in the task. To the newcomers drawn to adventuring via *Dark Crystal*: Welcome, and hold on to your hats. The adventure has really just begun.

Cerf's Up

Chris Cerf is a renaissance man. He is not only a writer, editor, and publisher (son of the late Bennett Cerf), but the man who got Jim Henson and Frank Oz excited about microcomputers. Both men told me of their interests in the field—Oz is close to purchasing a micro.

When you meet Chris, you realize how infectious his enthusiasm can be. As a frequent contributor of material for TV's *Sesame Street*, the possibilities of microcomputers in education look especially promising to him. As does the general literary potential of the medium.

"The adventure is a perfect way to get 'humanities types' into computers," he says. "Especially the ones lacking in hand-eye skills." One of his jobs at Henson is to act as a bridge between the raw talent on both philosophic banks of the river: those who are strong in programming, and those who are strong in verbal skills. "People like Roberta Williams are quite rare. Most adventures around today are turned out by folks who are programmers, not writers by any means. I'm working to change that."

"I'd like to coax some humor into the form as well," says Cerf. "The

adventure can become a literary medium." He states that storyline, as well as sound and graphics in an adventure program, can achieve a sophistication far beyond anything yet seen.

This bodes well for education as well, according to Cerf. "Adventures prompt familiarity with the keyboard, with textual material, with creative problem-solving, as well as making the user feel a part of what is going on, rather than a mere observer."

He showed me some promising preliminary results of photographically digitized images, and predicted that the photographic approach would eventually replace the current "graphics tablet" approach to adventure graphics. It saves work, as original art can be digitized directly instead of being tediously redrawn. And the results can actually be superior. The current disadvantage is extra memory cost per image. Cerf is undaunted. "We'll get it right."

As for the place of the videodisc in all this, Cerf is only a bit less optimistic. He points out that the cost of mastering a disk remains prohibitive. "It will happen," he predicts. "But we may be talking about ten years from now."